DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 880 EA 026 590

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TITLE Preventing Violence in Schools.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.; National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002006
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Association of Elementary School Principals, Educational Products, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-3483 ($2.50; bulk orders of 10 or more, $2 each; Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
JOURNAL CIT Research Roundup; v11 n2 Win 1994/95

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; *Discipline Policy; Drug Abuse; *Educational Environment; Elementary Education; Juvenile Gangs; Leadership; *Prevention; School Policy; *School Safety; Sexual Harassment; *Violence

ABSTRACT

Elementary school principals are in a key position to prevent school violence. This document reviews five publications that feature strategies administrators and teachers can use to create a safe school. In "Creating Safe Environments for Learning in North Carolina's Public Schools," Tanya M. Suarez reviews the literature on school safety and highlights the characteristics of schools that are safe places to learn in the midst of community violence. In "Violence in the Schools: How to Proactively Prevent and Defuse It," Joan L. Curcio and Patricia F. First offer strategies to defuse situations that promise to explode into violence. They discuss methods of preventing cultural and racial clashes, the growth of gangs, weapons in school, sexual harassment, and physical intimidation. "Second Step: A Violence-Prevention Curriculum," by the Committee for Children, presents a curriculum that reduces the potential for student violence by teaching skills in impulse control, anger management, and empathy. Diane Aleem and Oliver Moles, cochairs of the Goal Six Work Group, suggest ways that schools may be able to reduce student violence by creating orderly and nurturing learning environments in the publication "Reaching the Goals: Goal 6--Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools." Finally, in "Reducing School Violence in Florida," Stephanie Kadel and Joseph Follman describe actions that principals can take to prevent school violence. (LMI)

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VOLUME 11, NUMBER 2

WINTER 1994/95

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Research ROUNDUP

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

ED 380 880

Preventing Violence in Schools

Dean Walker

In 1991, the FBI reported that violent crimes committed by juveniles aged 10 to 17 skyrocketed during the 1980s. And things haven't changed in the '90s. A 1992 study reported that 43 percent of inner-city youth aged 7 to 19 said that they had witnessed a homicide.

While most of the sensational stories about gun-toting youth and rampant gang violence focus on middle and high school students, a growing number of elementary school principals are witnessing the unwelcome drama of deadly violence. Coping with misbehavior and emotional problems of children whose lives are touched by violence takes a heavy toll on school staff at all educational levels.

When violence seems to have so thoroughly permeated American culture, can we hope to make schools safe havens for children? Certainly the seeds of a more peaceful society must be sown in many fields, not only on school property. Nevertheless, elementary school principals are in a key position to prevent school violence. Through strong leadership and careful attention to the network of relationships that exist in the school, the principal can nourish a school atmosphere of civility rather than hostility.

The five items reviewed here feature ideas and strategies that administrators and teachers can use to create schools that offer children a refuge where they can learn how to live together in peace.

Tanya M. Suarez reviews the literature on school safety and highlights characteristics of schools that are safe places to learn in the midst of community violence.

Joan L. Curcio and *Patricia F. First* offer strategies to defuse situations that promise to explode into violence. They discuss methods of preventing cultural and racial clashes, the growth of gangs, weapons in school, sexual harassment, and physical intimidation.

The *Committee for Children* presents a curriculum that reduces the potential for student violence by teaching skills in impulse control, anger management, and empathy.

Diane Aleem and Oliver Moles, co-chairs of the Goal Six Work Group, suggest ways that schools may be able to reduce student violence by creating orderly and nurturing learning environments.

Finally, *Stephanie Kadel* and *Joseph Follman* write about what principals can do to keep their schools safe.

Suarez, Tanya M. **Creating Safe Environments for Learning in North Carolina's Public Schools.** Chapel Hill, North Carolina: North Carolina Educational Policy Research Center, 1992. 17 pages.

Suarez summarizes research on the characteristics of safe schools in four areas: students, structure and environment, policies, and involvement of the community.

In regard to *students*, safe schools:

• Have personnel to support students, staff, and parents. These personnel might be school employ-

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ees—counselors, psychologists, nurses, and tutors—but they may also be community agency people, such as law enforcement officers and social workers.

- Offer instruction to all students concerning self-awareness, social relationships and skills, and personal development.
- Create and maintain a perception of belonging and commitment to the school.
- Recognize students when they succeed in academics, sports, or interpersonal activities.

Concerning *structure and environment*, safe schools have:

- Principals who are strong leaders in creating a positive social environment that envelops all staff and students.
- An administrative structure that is open and flexible rather than closed and rigid.
- Cohesiveness among the school's teaching staff and administrators.
- A focus on curriculum geared to the academic, cultural, and developmental needs of the students.
- Classroom environments emphasizing cooperation, not competition, where students feel safe to take academic risks.
- Active involvement of students, staff, and parents in meaningful decision making.
- High expectations for academic performance and personal behavior.
- Adequate supervision in classrooms and elsewhere on school property.
- A relatively small number of students, or division by large schools into smaller units.

Related to *policies*, safe schools provide:

- Rules that are firmly enforced and fairly administered, and are well known by staff, students, and parents.
- Effective discipline, with participation by all school staff, involvement of students in problem-solving, and a focus on remedying causes of disorder rather than addressing only the symptoms.
- Consequences for inappropriate behavior that are used as helpful feedback and learning experiences rather than short-term punishments.

Finally, related to *community involvement*, safe schools:

- Cooperate vigorously with community agencies to provide services and contacts for students.
- Actively promote and eagerly accept parent involvement in the school.

Curcio, Joan L., and First, Patricia F. **Violence in the Schools: How to Proactively Prevent and Defuse It.** Newbury Park, California: Corwin Press, 1993. 56 pages. ED 358 548. $15.

Curcio and First divide school violence into three categories: student-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, and student-to-student. In chapter 5, the authors offer strategies for violence prevention in five areas: racial and ethnic group conflict, guns and other weapons in schools, gang activity, sexual harassment or assault, and bullying or intimidation.

Prevention of racial and ethnic conflict should begin the first day a student enters the classroom, say Curcio and First, and they offer four prevention strategies. First, design a consistent program of curriculum development to confront stereotyping and encourage cross-cultural understanding. Second, provide students and staff with regular opportunities to discuss prejudice and ethnic or racial conflict in an atmosphere that emphasizes shared values of fairness, democracy, and honesty.

Third, find ways of grouping students to provide opportunities for learning the skills of group dynamics and conflict resolution. Finally, take proactive steps to reach out to the minority community in ways that improve communication and overcome parent reluctance to be involved in the school.

To prevent gun- and other weapon-related violence, Curcio and First suggest that schools:

- Write and implement firm policies on consequences of carrying guns and other weapons to school.
- Include in the curriculum a handgun violence-prevention program such as Straight Talk about Risks (STAR), a pre-K through 12 curriculum available from the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence in Washington, DC.
- Train teachers to defuse potentially dangerous situations.
- Address the low self-esteem that often underlies the need for carrying a symbol of power, such as a handgun.

Curcio and First note that gangs can fill a vacuum

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This publication was prepared by the Clearinghouse with funding from OERI, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. OERI-RR-93002006. No Federal funds were used in the printing of this publication.

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of acceptance in youngsters' lives. Preventing gang involvement means helping children experience success in school, and cultivating in them a sense of belonging in a positive peer culture. The authors suggest that administrators provide an after-school program of sports and other activities, and work to involve students who are particularly vulnerable to the lure of gangs.

Sexual assault and harassment are rooted in sexual inequality, stereotyping, and the roles offered or denied to girls and boys. It is most effective to begin addressing these issues while students are still in elementary school. Curcio and First suggest that educators:

- Define as harassment and prohibit behaviors such as catcalls, wolf whistles, and uninvited touching.
- Create opportunities to discuss fairness, equity, and justice in relationships between girls and boys.
- Provide a sexual abuse prevention curriculum, beginning in kindergarten. Define abuse broadly and emphasize that children can be abusive toward one another.

Finally, Curcio and First advise school staff not to accept bullying and intimidation among school children as just "part of the way children are." Three proactive preventive measures can "nip violent propensities in the bud." Begin, through training and discussion, to heighten adult and student awareness of the unacceptability and serious effects of bullying behavior.

Second, provide opportunities for every child to attain legitimate status. Avoid ability grouping, which can erode the status of students in lower groups. Emphasize cooperation over academic competition, so that all students can experience success and belonging. Finally, train students and staff in peaceful conflict-resolution methods and expect everyone to use them.

Committee for Children. **Second Step: A Violence-Prevention Curriculum. Grades 1-3** (Teacher's Guide). Seattle, Washington: The Committee, 1992. 87 pages. ED 365 740.

The Second Step curriculum for grades 1-3 is designed to reduce impulsive and aggressive behavior in children aged 6 through 9. It is part of a series that includes curricula for preschool/kindergarten and grades 4-5 and 6-8.

Lessons in the curriculum are based on research that has defined the skill deficits that put children at risk for violent behavior. These deficits include a lack of empathy, impulse control, problem-solving and anger management skills, and assertiveness. The curriculum developers believe that children learn to act pro-socially in the same ways they learn to act antisocially—through modeling, practice, and reinforcement—and use these techniques to teach children the skills needed to implement pro-social behavior.

All children benefit, directly or indirectly from the resulting improved school climate. Students who have empathy for others' feelings and points of view are less likely to misunderstand and become angry at their peers. They also are less likely to hurt others.

Research also indicates that children can be taught anger management at an early age if they learn how to recognize their anger triggers and cues, giving them opportunities to practice using "self-talk" to calm down or prevent the onset of angry feelings.

The Seattle School District piloted the Second Step series in 1988, and results indicate that empathy, problem-solving, and anger-management skills were significantly enhanced among participants, resulting in a positive change in classroom climate. To obtain a summary report of Second Step pilot projects, write to Research and Development, Committee for Children, 172 20th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122.

The Goal Six Work Group, Diane Aleem and Oliver Moles, co-chairs. **Reaching the Goals: Goal 6—Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools.** Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, September 1993. 37 pages. ED 357 445.

In 1989, the nation's governors and President Bush adopted eight National Education Goals. This document is a synthesis of the research aimed at helping schools attain goal 6: to have every school free of drugs, alcohol, guns, and violence.

The authors note that student misbehavior and violence often have common origins. Continual disruptions in the orderly flow of the school day can create a climate in which violence can erupt. Therefore it is more effective to prevent violence by cultivating a nurturing environment than to concentrate on controlling student misbehavior. Research has uncovered three important differences between schools that create a nurturing and orderly climate and those that fail to do so.

Goals: In schools that emphasize an academic mission, students are more engaged and spend more time doing their work. Teachers have a higher sense of mastery, have higher expectations for their students, derive more satisfaction from their work, re-

port less absenteeism, and tend to have more positive interactions with students. These student and staff characteristics make it more likely that student time and energy are invested in legitimate school purposes rather than in a negative peer culture that might sanction violent behavior.

Rules and procedures: Students and teachers feel safe in schools which have clear discipline standards that are firmly, fairly, and consistently enforced.

Staff/student relationships: Interpersonal relationships flourish in schools with a strong ethic of caring. Students tell researchers that their teachers like them and care about them, and that they value their teachers' opinions. Teachers at such schools report knowing more students, including many not in their classes, and experiencing higher levels of student cooperation and support.

Kadel, Stephanie, and Follman, Joseph. **Reducing School Violence in Florida. Hot Topics. Usable Research.** Washington, DC: SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education. February 1993. 104 pages. ED 355 614. Order from NEFEC/SERVE, Route 1, Box 800, Palatka, FL 32177. $7.00, quantity discounts available.

This document reviews a wide range of "usable research" about how to reduce school violence. The authors suggest that principals can play an important role in violence prevention if they:

- Maintain a high profile by walking the halls and school grounds regularly.
- Frequently visit classrooms and make themselves readily available to teachers, students, and parents.
- Express sincere feelings toward students, a genuine interest in their lives, and a belief in their potential for success.
- Develop relationships with student leaders who tend to affect the school climate, either negatively or positively, in order to influence their activities and enlist their support.
- Spearhead the development of a definitive crisis-management plan for dealing with the possible intrusion of violence from the community into the classroom.
- Link out-of-school suspensions for violent student behavior with long-term preventive and rehabilitative strategies.

Principals who follow these guidelines can cool the "hot spots" in their school climate with friendliness, fairness, and firmness, ensuring that their school is a safe haven for its students and staff.

Research Roundup is published three times during the school year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Single copies: $2.50; bulk orders (10 or more): $2.00 ea. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. Specify date and title of issue when ordering. Checks payable to NAESP must accompany order. Send to Educational Products, NAESP, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3483.

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